Wow - it is hot outside and this gives us the perfect temperature for bacteria to grow in our food. Food safety is important year around, however, it is especially important to be cautious during the hot summer months. Foodborne illness or "food poisoning" is something that most people think of as occurring only in a restaurant. However, there are many things that we do in our own homes that make us sick, more importantly, there are ways that we can prevent ourselves from getting sick from eating food prepared at home. People pose the greatest threat to our food supply but people can prevent foodborne illness from occurring.

Bacteria cannot be seen, smelled or tasted - they are an invisible enemy. However we can fight bacteria through the four simple steps of clean, separate, cook and chill. One of the most important things that we can do is to clean and by doing so means washing our hands and surfaces often. Our hands should be washed in hot soapy water before and after handling food. In addition anytime we use the restroom, change a diaper, handle pets, or anything else that may cause our hands to become dirty, we should wash them. It is important when washing our hands that we take our time and use soap, scrubbing them for at least twenty seconds before rinsing and drying them. It is not good enough to just run them under some water and call them washed! In addition it is important to wash cutting boards, utensils, dishes and counter tops before and after preparing foods.

Step two is to separate and not cross contaminate. Cross contamination is how bacteria spread from one food product or surface to another. You should always keep raw meat, poultry and seafood separate from other foods in your grocery cart, consider placing them in a plastic bag in your cart to keep them from accidentally dripping (cross contaminating) onto other foods. Also store these raw products on the lower shelf in your refrigerator. If it is possible use a separate cutting board when preparing raw meats and vegetables. If you use the same cutting board wash and rinse it in between uses and cut up your raw vegetables first. Never place cooked meat onto a plate, which previously had raw meat, poultry or seafood on it.

Step three is to cook to proper temperatures. The only way to know if you are cooking to the proper temperature is to use a food thermometer. By using a clean thermometer you can measure the internal cooking temperature to ensure that your meat, poultry, casseroles and other food items are cooked all the way through. Visual cues and signs are good, but not enough to ensure proper cooking. The meat thermometer is one of the most important tools that you can have in the kitchen. Information regarding cooking times and temperature can be obtained through your local Extension Office.

Step four is to chill. Foods should be refrigerated quickly to keep harmful bacteria from growing and multiplying in the food. Your refrigerator should be set no higher than 40°F and your freezer no higher than 0°F. It is a good ideal to check these temperatures periodically with an appliance thermometer. Your perishable food should be refrigerated or frozen within two hours of preparation. You should always divide large amounts of leftovers into small, shallow containers in order to allow them to quickly cool. In addition, do not pack your refrigerator, allow room for air to circulate. Furthermore, never defrost your food on the counter at room temperature. Foods may be thawed in the refrigerator, in the microwave (cook immediately after), under cold running water or as part of the cooking processing checking to see that the proper internal temperature has been met.

We may all have an invisible enemy in our kitchen however through these four easy steps we can eliminate
bacteria and the illnesses that it causes.

Food Service managers and employees can call us about our upcoming Food Manager Certification Class and Employee Food Safety Training our next training date is August 6, 2003. Call 1-888-232-8723 at least 7 days prior to the exam to register and receive further information. If you have any further questions or concerns or would like more information on this topic or many others, please contact your local Cooperative Extension Office.

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